



Candidate Derailment

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By Cheryl Hyatt and Marylouise Fennell, RSM, Partners Hyatt-Fennell

We've seen it more times than we'd like to recall. Often a promising candidate begins the executive search process and seems to offer many of the skills and strengths our clients are seeking. He or she then frequently makes it into the semi-finals or even the finals of a rigorous, intensive search. But then, before the offer is tendered, something is said or done that derails the process. Usually it's an action or oversight that could easily have been avoided with advance thought, preparation or planning. Such candidates cost themselves, us and our clients unnecessary time, energy and money.

Here are some of the most common that we observe:

"Puzzling" resumes: Too many cv's that we receive for senior level searches are incomplete or require an inordinate amount of time to determine such basics as contact information for candidates and their references; exact dates and locations of employment; and specific job responsibilities for each position held. "Consulting" is a term often used to mask unemployment; candidates need to show that this work is bona fide by listing clients, responsibilities and current contact information.

A closely related challenge is:

Honest communication: We can manage most common issues such as employment "gaps" if candidates are completely honest with us from the start. When we know the real reason for a termination or for seeking a new position, we can package and position the candidate to future employers. If we don't know, however, we can be caught off-guard and jeopardize any possible chances for search success. Committees usually 'assume' the worst when something is not clearly defined. Effective search communication also includes:

Buy-ins from family: Serious search candidates for positions, especially those involving relocation, need to have this

conversation with spouses, significant others and children earlier rather than later in the search process, certainly before the semi-final stage. It's best to discuss a move with the family early in the process so there are not surprises during the end stage. We had a finalist who was about to receive an offer but pulled out of the search because his nine year old daughter did not want to move!

Finally,

Availability: While most professional search firms will respect a candidate's desire not to be contacted at his or her current place of employment, don't narrow your availability to just a few hours a day or rule out evenings and weekends. If you've given an email address as your means of contact, be sure to check it often. Remember, you are looking for a job! The Search Consultant should have all your phone numbers.

Other derailers typically involve a lack of preparation for the interview or serious gaffes during the conversation itself. Expectations rise with the level of the position, so slip-ups for senior level positions will typically end consideration.

Serious candidates need to position themselves for success by:

Dressing conservatively and appropriately; for gentlemen, this means jacket, ties and shirt collars buttoned. For ladies, it means business suits and professional accessories and grooming.

Don't over disclose about your reasons for leaving or about specific differences with former presidents or supervisors. Higher education is a small world. The person whom you are "dissing" may very well be a friend of the interviewer. Loyalty is also vital; if you aren't loyal to your current employer, it's unlikely you'll be loyal to the next.

Manners count. Stay in touch with your executive search firm; respect the professionals' time. Don't expect them to

track you down. This also goes for the interview process itself. It should go without saying, but we have actually seen candidates take personal cell phone calls during interviews. Leave your electronic devices turned off and preferably, at home.

In today's highly competitive job market, every possible advantage counts. Unfortunately, candidates are often their own worst enemies; avoid these derailers, and maximize your chances for success.

Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, has spent more than 35 years in higher education administration and search and is among the best-known and highly respected consultants in the field of independent higher education. She served as president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh and is the senior counsel to the Washington, DC-based Council of Independent Colleges. She has been an independent search consultant for more than 20 years, and has consulted widely throughout the world, where she worked with many colleges, universities and non-profits. Dr. Fennell currently sits on three college boards .

With almost 20 years of executive search consulting experience, Cheryl Hyatt has been responsible for successfully recruiting senior administrative professionals for educational and non-profit organizations. She brings 30 years of management and organizational leadership experience to her role with clients. Cheryl's breadth of experience, knowledge and contacts make her sought after professionally in her field. Mrs. Hyatt also sits on various local non-profit boards offering a variety of expertise to each organization.

Both authors are partners in the Executive Search Group Hyatt – Fennell, a firm that works with not-for-profit clients with a strong commitment to education.